



No. 99

\$4.00 (CAD)

REVIEWS: Oracle Origine turntable, the Totem Signature One speaker, a phono stage and a personal DAC from Simaudio, and two cables from Russia.

FEATURES: Getting music from a groove, then and now, choosing a cinema screen size, and why music exists.

MUSIC: The Music of the Resistance: the long battle of songwriters and musicians to abolish war once and for all.





ORACLE ORIGINE

How long has this Canadian company been building turntables? Since about 1979, if memory serves. Its original table was the Delphi (the oracle of Delphi, get it?). It was born of controversy. An influential small-circulation magazine called *The Audio Critic* accused the founders of industrial espionage (in other words, copying another company's design) but also, paradoxically, of dilletantism (in other words, not knowing what the hell they were doing). But then the same magazine said awful things about us too. Suffice it to say that the little magazine is gone, and we and Oracle are still around.

But 39 years is a long time, and the company, like its products, has evolved. The Delphi got to its fourth incarnation before our first review. By then the turntable itself was excellent, though the early tone arms weren't. The Delphi, often dismissed as a mere lifestyle sculpture, was joined by other models, such as the Paris (named for the Trojan prince of Antiquity, not the French city). Some were very good, others less so, but all were dramatically styled. We

know a lot of audio gear is so ugly only its mother could love it, but Oracle has always been an exception. So it is with this latest turntable, the Origine.

It's obvious that the aesthetics have not been ignored. This is one of the best-looking turntables you can buy. Its design is at once simple and ambitious, intended to yield high performance at an affordable price. It is simple without being oversimplified. And if you don't think the Origine is affordable, you may not be aware of what a challenge it is to get all the music out of a record groove. The Origine is meant to get the basics right, and offer it as something close to a plug-and-play solution: turntable, arm and cartridge for less than \$3,000, easy to assemble even if you don't have a local dealer.

The curved methacrylate structure is attractive (and best handled with the supplied white gloves), but the shape is also intended to enhance performance, not just decor. The perfectly rectangular plinth of the typical high-end turntable is a tuned space, vulnerable to standing waves. A turntable is a device to detect vibrations, and the last thing you want

is outside vibrations making waves.

One technique used to isolate a turntable and its arm from the busy outside world is the suspended subchassis: the table and arm float on springs or some other means of levitation. The Linn Sondek (one of our two reference turntables) works that way, and so does our reference table, Audiomeca J-1. Such suspensions are less often seen, however, because the odds are you won't have a local turntable dealer to set it up. And if you do, the store's technician may be more at home with microchips than tone arms.

The Origine has no enclosed space, and thus no plinth. Its structure is made up of three layers, the middle one of which is translucent. Ours was orange, as you can see, though you can specify some other color, such as blue or red, or you can order two. We were disappointed to find that it is not backlit, because it had always seemed that way at shows. You can position a light at the rear, as Oracle likes to do, and as we did for our photographs. A future version will include an LED array running from the Origine's own power supply.



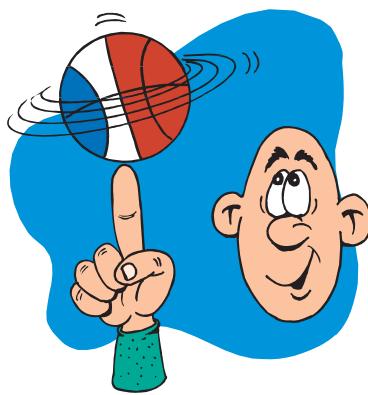
The motor is a simple one, a synchronous unit in a freestanding pod, running on 18-volt AC from the wall wart supply. The motor has an on-off switch but no speed control. You change speed by repositioning the drive belt from one pulley to the other. By moving the pod closer or farther from the turntable, you can make the belt tighter or slack. Because belt tension can alter the speed, Oracle includes a large strobe disc for speed checking.

The platter's shaft is threaded and a screw-on record clamp is provided. It's a one-piece unit, which means that as you tighten it, it rubs on the record label. We don't like that. The clamp's velvet underside minimizes the damage, but we would substitute another clamp, such as the J.A. Michell, on which only the central knob turns.

We've already alluded to problems with Oracle's early tone arms, and the Delphi came into its own when the company turned to third-party arms. With the Origine, Oracle is in the arm business once again, and its design is more than a little intriguing.

As you can see from our photo above, the arm has a single-point bearing. Think of a basketball player spinning

the ball on his index finger.



Done properly, such a bearing has extraordinarily low friction. The downside is that it is free to move in all directions. It can tilt to the right or the left, and it needs to be perfectly aligned. The tilting also makes it awkward to position the stylus precisely over a chosen track.

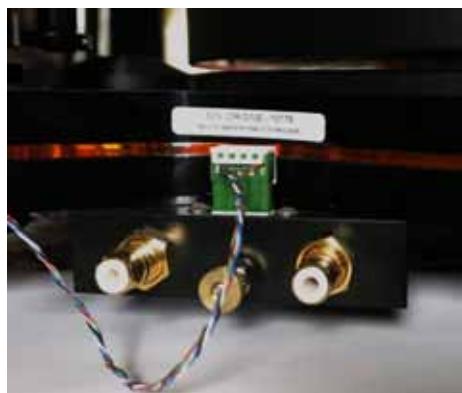
There's another way the arm is unusual, and you can see it in our photo on the next page. The counterweight "looks wrong," too low compared to the bearing. In fact, it's correct. The counterweight *should* be at the same height as the stylus, and this one is.

There's an odd-looking pod, called "the olive," halfway down the arm,

which looks as though you could slide it back and forth. Not quite. You adjust it with a screwdriver, to adjust the arm's characteristics to match the cartridge. By positioning it, you alter the combined resonance of the arm and cartridge. If it's too low (about 6 Hz, say), the cartridge will have trouble tracking the record. If it's too high (16 Hz or higher), the lower frequencies will be contaminated. Because ours came with an Ortofon MC-1 Turbo already installed, the adjustments had been made at the factory, making the Origine's installation pleasingly straightforward.

There is no detachable headshell, a good thing because you don't want extra mass near the end of the arm, but Oracle may have gone too far in minimizing that mass. The part of the arm that holds the cartridge is connected to the rest of the arm by a mere strip of metal, compromising the arm's rigidity.

Anti-skating is provided by a small weight at the end of a string. The string is looped over a metal rod, not a pulley, thus adding a small amount of friction. The arm is raised or lowered not with a lever, the usual system, but with a large knurled knob. We liked it.



The arm's wiring goes to a pair of output jacks, and so you can use the output cable you like. Since our Audiomeca arm also has output jacks, we used our own Atlas Titan cables rather than those supplied with the Origine. We set up the Origine in our Alpha room, alongside our Audiomeca J-1, and chose five recordings we consider especially revealing.

The first was *Chopin's Scherzo No. 2*, played by Edward Auer, on a Japanese direct-to-disc RCA (R DCE-7). This



is a masterful performance, with a mixture of explosive energy and the sensitivity that Chopin requires. It is a multi-microphone production, but with considerable room sound.

With the Origine the essentials were all there: the sharp attacks on the piano chords, the subtle reverberation at the end of notes, and especially the unique emotion that emerges from a great performance of Chopin. But both Albert and Toby noticed the changes in the piano itself. "He has a smaller piano with a tinnier upper register," said Toby. Albert found that too, with the notes less clear and the chords less rich. But both found that as the piece continued they stopped making comparisons and just enjoyed the music. "All the emotion was there," said Gerard, "and that's what's important."

Did the recording need more volume? We had set the volume so that it seemed subjectively the same as with our reference (we don't use instruments for level-matching, for reasons we've explained). We raised the level another 2 dB, just enough to add more life to the performance. It was a good choice.

The second recording was an unusual one, a Nonesuch (H-71126) re-release of one of the Club Français du Disque's old productions, with Alain Marion and the Chamber Orchestra of the Saare playing Mozart's *Andante for Flute and Orchestra*. This wonderful piece was originally part of his *Flute Concerto No. 1*, but the flutist he wrote it for, Ferdinand De Jean, wasn't up to the task, and Mozart wrote him a simpler dumbed-down movement instead.

With the Origine, the flute remained wonderfully lyrical and mellifluous, and the layers of the moderate-sized orchestra remained clear. We maintained our view that Mozart's doofus friend should

have taken extra lessons rather than asking for easier music. The strings were rather edgier, however, and the fault is probably that of the Ortofon cartridge rather than the Oracle turntable. The Andante is the last selection on that side,

close to the label. An elliptical stylus like that of the Ortofon can negotiate its twists and turns less well than the line-contact stylus on our Goldring Excel. Could the Oracle sound even better with a cartridge upgrade?



We continued with a much newer selection, *At the Ballet*, from Barbra Streisand's album, *Encore* (Columbia 88985 35097). The number is from the Broadway musical *A Chorus Line*, where three dancers (Streisand, Anne Hathaway and Daisy Ridley) audition for a sadistic director (Bradley Cooper). This is an outstanding recording, with a vast feeling of space, even though we know it's artificial. The Oracle did well by it. The voices remained clear and lifelike, with only the barest hint of roughness at higher levels. Once again, we might have been noticing the limitations of the cartridge rather than the turntable.

We've always liked Paul Simon's *Graceland* album, from which we played *Diamonds On the Soles of Her Shoes*. It's a difficult piece, and in the past we've heard turntables and other components get into serious difficulty with both the rhythm and the sibilance. We can say right off that the Oracle exhibited no such problem. The rhythm was strong, and the voices of the accompanying South African group, Ladysmith Black Mambazo, were clear, with superb weight. "The orchestra had more steel than brass," said Albert, "but I think

this turntable is more at ease with small groups like this." Toby praised the articulation, the clarity and the presence. We should note that this song is also the inner band on the record side.

We ended with an even older favorite, Ricki Lee Jones' *Easy Money* from her 1979 self-titled album. The song was new to Albert, who enjoyed the strong rhythm, the resonant sound and the great clarity of Ricki Lee's rather idiosyncratic articulation. The percussion and bass were superb. The voice had lost a little of its roundness with the Oracle, but not enough to diminish this delightful song.

SUMMING IT UP...

Brand/model: Oracle Origine

Price: C\$2,795

Footprint (WDH): 44 x 35 x 12 cm

Cartridge (optional): Ortofon MC-1 Turbo

Speeds: 33 1/3, 45 rpm

Most liked: Great looks, great sound

Least liked: Oversimplified record clamp

Verdict: Punches way above its weight

The test session was frankly a pleasure. The Origine is clearly intended to appeal to the eye, but it is kind to the ear as well. It's so good that it got us musing about possible extra-cost upgrades, either from Oracle itself or from third parties.

As we've already suggested, a better cartridge is an obvious candidate. So is the power supply, which merely passes AC from the power line on to the motor. Since the motor is in a freestanding module, it would be simple to offer an optional pod with a servo circuit, as some other turntable makers do. A speed control switch could be right on the module too. It could be an upgrade, to improve an already excellent turntable. We are not faulting Oracle for not providing these improvements from the start, since driving up the initial price might keep vinyl novices away from it. Upgrades, as always, can come later. When you've heard what's good, you want better.

At several audio shows, we heard the Origine mated to some very expensive electronics and speakers. Why? Isn't the source the most important link in the audio chain? Yes, but price doesn't tell the whole story.



CROSSTALK

There's usually something special about economy turntables, and of course I don't mean that in a good way. There's a reason some commentators dismiss the vinyl revival as a silly fad. Their turntables aren't very good, and in many cases they have long been in bad need of repair. Those of us with great tables shrug off their comments.

So here's an economy turntable that doesn't sound like an economy turntable. Oh, it's not perfect (else, what's a Heaven for?) but you don't spend much time thinking about what Oracle has done. You're too busy thinking about what the musicians have done, and that is as it should be.

And did I mention it looks great doing it?

—Gerard Rejskind

Listening tests usually fall between two extremes. When something doesn't sound right, it's a challenge to find out what

exactly is lacking in the music or what has been added to the sound. When something sounds right, as it did here, everything seems to fall into place effortlessly. Yet the challenge becomes more acute. What makes the sound so right? Not looking for technical explanations, but asking myself why I like it so much?

I haven't found a clear answer in this case. When I was tempted to compare, I heard many differences, yes, but frankly I didn't want to compare, analyze or dissect. Most of the time, I found myself partaking of the musical event instead, hearing lyrics clearly for the first time, "seeing" the performers, not just feeling their presence, finding that sense of balance on the sound stage that was intriguingly inviting, wanting to sit a bit longer and play another LP.

—Albert Simon

The story of this listening test is one of

pleasure after pleasure. The softer passages by Edward Auer pulled me into the music, and so did the tone of the flute and the pizzicato playing of an entire string section on the Mozart piece. On the Streisand song, the Origine's tonal balance seemed to favor speech slightly, and that made the words very clear, spoken or sung.

Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes was missing nothing important at all. Everything that was there in the reference was also there with the Oracle: notes sparkling like fireworks, drumbeats like gunpowder bombs. It was great to be there.

There was a slight change in tone, compared with the much more expensive analog source, and the occasional bit of roughness, but nothing you couldn't cure with a cartridge upgrade.

And really, this turntable sounds so good you might not even care.

—Toby Earp